

Breast Self-Massage for Lactating Mothers

What is breast engorgement?

Breast engorgement is a normal postpartum condition caused by congestion and swelling of breasts as milk production begins. Normal engorgement typically begins 3 to 5 days after delivery. You will feel relief within 24 to 48 hours by pumping or breastfeeding frequently to help with milk removal.

“Pathologic engorgement” is abnormal, exaggerated breast fullness accompanied by heat, tenderness and low-grade fever. It can happen at any time during breastfeeding if you do not empty your breasts completely or if you let your milk build up for too long.

What is a plugged milk duct and how could it lead to engorgement?

A plugged milk duct is an area of the breast where milk flow is blocked. The block can be inside the breast or at the tip of the nipple and can lead to engorgement at any time. You may get plugged ducts continually that last for several days.

When should I contact my health care provider?

If you notice signs of infection including fever, redness or swelling, contact your health care provider. Once your health care provider has indicated that there is no infection or suspicion of anything other than a plugged milk duct, you can perform self-massage and exercise-based stretches to promote maximum breast health, and lymph (fluid) flow.

How do I perform breast self-massage?

1. Use your fingertips to softly stroke the clavicle (collarbone) from the neck outwards to the shoulders, keeping the bone between the middle and ring fingers. Repeat 5-10 times.
2. Using the same finger positioning and direction, apply circular pressure from the neck outwards to your shoulders. Repeat 5-10 times
3. Place one hand behind your head and use your opposite hand's fingertips to apply 5-10 downward circular strokes to the breast, under the armpit.
4. On the same breast, cup one hand above and one hand below the breast. Use firm-gentle pressure to massage the breast in opposite directions for 5-10 counts.
5. Repeat #3 and #4 on the opposite breast.
6. Bend at your waist and dangle your head, arms, and breasts loosely towards the ground for a count of at least 5.
7. In this position, massage your breast by cupping one hand on top and one on the bottom of your breast for 5-10 counts.
8. Use one hand to apply 5-10 upward circular strokes to the breast, just under the armpit. Continue to make circular strokes around the base of the entire breast.
9. Repeat #7 and #8 on the opposite breast.
10. Return both arms to the "dangling" position, then slowly lift your torso and return to a standing position.
11. Roll shoulders backwards for a count of 10.
12. Lift both arms until hands meet above the head. Grasp the fingers of one hand with the other, then use this hand to pull your arm over, leaning at the waist.
13. Return to standing upright, then repeat #12 towards the opposite side.
14. Repeat #1

For a video of the breast self-massage, visit the Breast Feeding Support Program (BFSP) webpage. The video is at the bottom of the page:

<https://medicine.umich.edu/dept/pmr/programs/breast-feeding-support-program>

When should I call my health care provider?

Call your healthcare provider if you notice signs of infection, including fever, redness or swelling.

- If you delivered your baby within the past 6 weeks, you can call Triage at (734) 764-8134.
- For general breastfeeding questions, please call the Lactation Help Line at (844) 200-8894. You will be asked to leave a message and a lactation consultant will return your call within 24 hours.

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